

Elton's on the Air by FrazzledSquidz

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (mentioned) - Freeform, Angst, Character Study, Developing Relationship, F/M, Homophobic Language, Internalized Homophobia, Introspection, Kissing, M/M, Masturbation, Mild Language, Multi, Nightmares, Phone Sex, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Relationship Negotiation, Teenagers, dads being assholes, from that whole monster thing ya know, just trying to figure it all out, kind of, stressed out kids

Language: English

Relationships: Eventually - Relationship, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, they gotta work through their shit tho

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-16

Updated: 2017-12-30

Packaged: 2022-04-03 15:08:17

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 6

Words: 9,856

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"What's harder, harder to say?

That you want me to stay, or that you want me stay unchanged for you?

Chained to a lie, we're the same you and I, we're the same..."

1. Jonathan

Jonathan parked his car, something inside of him blanching as he stared at the mass of people lingering outside of Tina's house. Why on Earth was he doing this?

For Nancy, who made sure to invite him to places even though he always turned her down. For Will, his best buddy who knew he didn't have any friends and who didn't want his older brother hanging around him all the time. And, at the end of the day, for himself, really. Because he was so jealous at how easily Steve moved through the world and how openly he loved and how widely he smiled. And maybe if he tried a little harder, he could be more like that.

Jonathan knew he was a weirdo and he was proud of it (most days) but that didn't mean he also didn't want normal things. Like a girlfriend and to be invited to parties, even if he had no interest in attending. And, to some degree, to be more like the Steve Harringtons of the world: lovely and free and so at ease with themselves. Maybe then Nancy would actually like him back.

Not that he was actively trying to steal Nancy from Steve- not like he had a chance anyway- but he couldn't resist her magnetic pull. And just maybe she would want to be around him more if he were... better.

Jonathan sighed, briefly squeezing his eyes shut. He was a collection of contradictions: he wanted to be himself, but also just like everyone else. It was so frustrating.

Pushing the thought aside, he opened his door and swung out of the car, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets and he made his way up to the house. It was so loud outside with all the people, and it only got worse when he made it into the house. He liked Duran Duran fine, but he instinctively recoiled from people as they got too close, feeling his anxiety rear up inside of him at their proximity. He was easily able to recognize quite a few of his classmates through their costumes, thanks to years of quiet observation and contemplation, but he still didn't want them to be near him.

An upperclassman he didn't know stopped his search for Nancy almost immediately. Jonathan was proud that he was able to quip the line he'd been working on during the drive over here, knowing that his lack of costume was suspect and lame. Of course he'd ruined it a second later with his Kiss remark, but Samantha was surprisingly easy to talk to once they realized they each knew a lot about music, even if their tastes differed.

Later, Jonathan couldn't be sure which was the biggest shock of the night: that he easily fell into conversation with a stranger, the look on Steve's face when he brushed past a few minutes later, or what happened after.

He had seen Steve look angry before, but not upset. At least... not like that. Though it seemed like all of Steve's emotions had been funneled through rage last year, except when he was skirt-chasing. Jonathan glanced the way Steve had come from, assuming that he and Nancy had fought. But what does a dream couple fight about?

His first instinct was to head to the back of the house and to find Nancy, to offer his assistance and make sure she was okay. But something drew him the opposite way, lured him outside and cast his eyes around for a familiar swoop of hair. He and Steve were okay with each other now, but they definitely weren't friends. Sometimes Steve and Nancy tried to invite him out, but he didn't like or understand the way his stomach dipped every time he saw the other boy, so he largely avoided him. After all, their only real basis for friendship was attacking a monster and liking the same girl and being able to throw punches, none of which were things Jonathan thought of very highly.

So why was he trying to find him now?

Jonathan shoved his hands into his jacket pockets as he looked around the yard, but all he saw were the same trashed and costumed people he'd passed on his way in. He made his way down the concrete steps towards the street, thumbs rubbing over his knuckles absently. He passed by the front of a parked car and stood out in the middle of the street, looking one way and then the other. It was a little quieter out here, but between the party and the trick-or-treaters it was far from peaceful. There weren't a lot of kids on this street

though, as the hour grew later and the night got colder.

Jonathan turned and started walking down the road, thinking that he would look for just another minute before going back inside to Nancy. But no sooner had he formulated the thought when he ran into Steve, who was sitting in the street with his back to the passenger side of Jonathan's car.

"Steve?" he called out quietly, making the other boy's head jerk up. His face was cast mostly in the shadow of the car, but Jonathan thought he was maybe crying. His knees were drawn up towards his chest, arms draped over their peaks.

"Oh, hey man," he replied, trying to sound casual. "Am I in your way?"

"Uh, no, you're fine." Jonathan scuffed his sneakers against the road, feeling awkward. Why had he thought this was a good idea? Why would Steve want to talk with him of all people about his relationship problems? But he was already out here, so he forged ahead. "I, uh. I saw you leave the party."

"Oh, yeah." Steve's hidden hand came up, and the cherry of his cigarette glowed in the darkness as he took a long drag.

There was a pause as he let the smoke sit in his lungs and Jonathan floundered for what to say.

Steve finally exhaled, long and slow. "Surprised you came. Usually you avoid parties like the plague."

Jonathan was surprised he had noticed. "Yeah well, you know, Nancy..." he trailed off as Steve looked away

"Yeah. Nancy."

Silence descended again. Jonathan's hands fidgeted within his pockets as he mentally berated himself for never knowing what to say or do. Finally, for a lack of options other than retreating, he sat down next to Steve, pressing his back against the cool metal of his car.

Jonathan didn't know how to ask, so he decided not to. He tried to

relax as they sat there without speaking, letting the noise of the party and Halloween wash over them. Steve lit his second cigarette from the butt of his first. He briefly offered it to Jonathan, but took it back when the other boy shook his head.

The second cigarette was almost gone when Steve said, "She-" His voice broke, and he quickly cleared his throat to cover it. "She, uh. She said we killed Barb. You know? And that she doesn't love me."

Jonathan blinked in shock. They were the happiest couple he knew. "Well, she was drunk, right? I'm sure she didn't mean it." The argument was weak, even to him.

"I think she meant it," Steve murmured. "Which just, which just *sucks*, you know? Because I love her so much." He swiped his hand over his face, even though Jonathan couldn't really see him. Shadows covered his eyes even as the light played in his hair and across his cheekbones.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan muttered, not really knowing what else to say.

Steve sniffed and cleared his throat. "Yeah well, I guess you can have her now. That's what you want, isn't it?"

He frowned. "What? No." Yes. "That's... That's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here, Byers?" Steve asked roughly, taking the last drag of his cigarette and extinguishing it viciously on the ground. "Huh? Come to gloat? Come to see me down and out?"

"What the hell, Steve? I came out here because you looked upset, okay? I wanted to see if I could do anything."

"Well, you can't. Unless you can just, like, turn back time. Or convince Nancy to love me." His voice broke again. "Shit," he whispered, burying his face in his arms, which were crossed over his knees. "Goddamn it."

Jonathan's chest hurt. He felt guilty, even though he hadn't done anything. He tentatively placed a hand on Steve's shoulder, fingers gently curled into his shoulder blade, trying to offer some kind of comfort. "I'm sorry, Steve."

Both boys fell quiet again, with the exception of the soft noises coming from Steve as he tried, and failed, to hold back his tears. He took a few shaky breaths, obviously fighting for control. After a minute he told Jonathan, "I'm okay. But could you- could you make sure she gets home? I'll move so you can actually get out of here."

"Yeah, I can do that," he replied softly, withdrawing his hand from the heat of Steve's back reluctantly.

"Just go, Byers," Steve told him when he didn't move right away. "I'll be fine."

He sounded sad and exhausted and like he wouldn't be fine at all, but Jonathan knew he needed space, so he slowly stood up and walked back to the house, something heavy settling in his chest.

Jonathan found Nancy inside, curled up by the vanity and gently snoring into her wet sweater. When he couldn't rouse her he gently picked her up and carried her out to his car, ignoring the wolf-whistles and cat calls from his drunk classmates. Even though he knew he would be, Jonathan still found himself surprised to find Steve gone.

The drive was uneventful, but it was frankly a miracle that Jonathan was able to get Nancy up into her room without either of her parents seeing them. He had slipped her boots off and was tucking her in when she grabbed his arm, staring up at him.

It broke his heart, the way Nancy queried his name and how sad she looked at that moment. Jonathan realized then that he had fallen for her act of being alright, of having effectively dealt with the horrors last year had brought. He knew that none of them were the same, but it wasn't like they ever talked about what had happened and how it had affected them. Pretending everything was all well and good worked... until it didn't.

Jonathan sighed quietly as her hand dropped and her eyes fell closed. She had told Steve that she thought they killed Barb? What else was she carrying around all by herself, with no one to share the burden?

Jonathan shoved his hands in his jacket pockets as he turned and left,

resolving to try and be a better friend for Nancy.

Maybe he could also try with Steve?

2. Steve

Summary for the Chapter:

*One and only, God, it's lonely here
On the other side of love
Teenage story in its glory
God, it's never quite enough*

-Backslide by the Naked and the Famous

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay so I hate rehashing stuff that's already happened but I'm bringing them closer together I swear. Nancy's chapter is next and then the good shit starts happening (and by the good shit I mean poly loveliness).

Steve knew a lot about anger. He knew the different forms it took and the different ways it expressed itself through people.

His dad, for instance, had that icy kind. It chilled those around him and discouraged contact. His face could be expressionless, but when he looked at Steve the coldness in his eyes was enough to make Steve's spine straighten and his jaw square, his body automatically preparing for a fight.

Or Jonathan. His anger was like a pool of water that gently lapped at the shores of his consciousness, but when disturbed became a drowning force. Those still waters were capable of tsunamis and hurricanes and violent destruction, just from being disturbed from their natural state.

Steve's was the slow-burning kind. Or it had been, at any rate. His anger used to simmer inside of his chest, flames licking up at his heart, hurting him and driving him to lash out. When it flared up it effectively burned his target, but also himself as well.

Steve wondered absently, as Billy knocked him to the ground and

taunted him, where that fire had gone. Maybe it was a part of growing up or his fight with Nancy, but there was no part of Steve that gave a single fuck what Billy Hargrove thought or had to say about or did to him. “King Steve?” There were so many other things, bigger things, to worry about than the kind of asshole he'd been up until last year.

Like we love each other, she had spat at him, all drunken scorn.

That's what hurt. Because Steve did love Nancy- God did he love her! He had slowly been planning the rest of his life around her and her friends (really just the late Barb and Jonathan who lurked on the sidelines) and her plans. Not that he really cared about college or where he wound up working anyway, as long as she was there. And she had been there up until her bullshit speech.

Steve grimaced at the smooth basket Billy made, but he was already drifting away. Normally basketball helped him keep his mind off everything else, but now it was just going in torturous circles around *Nancy* and *bullshit* and *Jonathan* and the future...

And then she was in front of him, indignant that he hadn't picked her up that morning for school.

Nancy's anger also reminded him of fire, but the kind that inspired motion and not just pain. If Steve's was a simmer, Nancy's was an intention. When she got angry she didn't just sit with it, she followed it through. And maybe that's why this year had been so hard: she was still angry over the forces that stole her best friend from her, but she didn't know what to do about it. That fire was pushing the locomotion of her heart, but there was no destination. It was just burning itself up.

But that didn't have anything to do with Steve, or with their relationship. And he had been good at anger up until last year, but dating Nancy had quelled so much of it. She had calmed him and that fire; now it was just a spark. It was singeing him here and there, but he didn't want to hurt her.

“That was your other boyfriend. That was... that was Jonathan.” Steve's heart ached, thinking about Jonathan putting her to bed and

taking care of her when it should have been him. He couldn't stop his mind from flashing back to last year when he had crawled up to her window and found them pressed against each other on her bed. He had felt so betrayed, so heartbroken that Nancy could turn away from him just like that and fall into the arms of someone else.

It was all bullshit.

"Well then tell me!"

"Tell you what?"

Steve's mind flashed back to the previous night, lingering on the feeling of Jonathan sitting beside him being quietly supportive. "You love me."

Even before the spell had been broken by his teammate, as she'd raised her eyebrows and tried to act surprised, he knew. And when he turned back to her and she looked up at him he saw longing and confusion and pain... but not love.

Resignation settled heavily on his shoulders. He had tried so hard and fought for her and for this and for everything and none of it even mattered.

"I think that you're bullshit," he told her, walking away.

This was the one thing Steve had really tried for, had really loved, and it hadn't mattered.

--

The thing about Billy Hargrove (okay, one of the things) was that he got under Steve's skin no matter how hard he tried to ignore him. He didn't care, he *didn't*. But also the guy reminded Steve uncomfortably of himself, back when he had been King Steve. He knew what to say to throw you off your game and then used physical prowess to actually throw you.

Steve hated himself for falling into that cycle, but he also recognized that he was easy prey. He felt like he was turned inside out, like all of his tender insides were on display for anyone to poke and prod at.

“Oh shit. You don’t know.”

And, of course, people like Billy and Tommy *did* poke. And Jonathan... Jonathan was like the annoying black fly hovering at the edges of Steve’s vision. They were cool even if they weren’t friends, but why did Nancy have to go off with him? And why did everyone at school seem to know about it except for him?

She skipped school? With Jonathan? They both actually seemed to care about this stuff. And they hadn’t been back since? Where could they have gone, especially together?

Billy was still there. “A pretty boy like you has got nothing to worry about.”

Steve looked over at him, hating the way something zipped down his spine at *pretty boy* and hating Billy Hargrove.

Did... did this boy have a crush on him? He thought it had all been hazing, but the way Billy followed him around, learned all about him, his lingering gaze... He had been sizing Steve up, but maybe not only in the way Steve had thought. It made him uncomfortable and it also, inexplicably, made him think of Jonathan.

Was that because he had used to think Jonathan was queer? Well, back then Jonathan Byers had been a myriad of things to Steve: lonely, creepy, queer, weird, antisocial... the complete opposite of Steve. Or so Steve had thought up until they had faced down a monster together.

Actually, Steve still didn’t know that much about Jonathan. Except that he liked Nancy. And it seemed like Nancy liked him back. Steve roughly turned the shower off, grabbing his towel and quickly wrapping it around his body. Well he wasn’t going to just roll over and let him have her: he was going to fight for Nancy Wheeler. He loved her and knew that, even if she didn’t love him, she cared for him.

--

Of course monsters and middle schoolers got in the way, because why not.

3. Nancy

Summary for the Chapter:

*These vultures rob everything
Leave nothing but chains
Pick a point on the globe
Yes the pictures the same*

-Calm Like a Bomb by Rage Against the Machine

It was unacceptable.

“Mad?” Jonathan echoed back at her, like it was a foreign concept to him, like he had never thought to be upset at the people responsible for all of this.

Yes, mad. Those people had ruined their lives. Well, changed Nancy’s and Jonathan’s, but had ruined Will’s and ended Barb’s. They had wreaked havoc and then just walked away, had gotten to sweep everything under the rug and pretend it had never happened. Barb’s parents were *selling their house* trying to pay a man who claimed he could either find their daughter or find information regarding her whereabouts, and all the while Nancy knew but couldn’t tell the truth.

It was *unacceptable*. And she was going to do something about it. Not only for Barb, but for peace of mind for Barb’s parents and, honestly, for herself as well. Because how could she concentrate on Steve (or Jonathan) and school and her family and the future with Barb’s ghost lingering over her heart and her head?

Nancy had tried; she had given it a solid year of her best effort to live and let go. But all the while her anger had morphed into an incandescent fury, the kind where she was now solely focused on the meaningful consequences of her actions.

“Do you want to skip fourth period?” What she was really asking Jonathan was if he wanted to help her take down the people responsible for killing Barb and hurting Will in ways they could only

imagine. She didn't need his help, but... it would be nice not to have to enact her plan by herself.

Of course he said yes, he would go with her. He always followed her lead. And so she told him her idea.

--

"Don't you think it's weird? How we only hang out when the world is about to end?" But what she was really thinking about was how, in these moments of crisis, Jonathan was the one who was there. Jonathan, who spent so much time lurking in the background, always seemed to step up right when Nancy wanted help.

Though that wasn't entirely fair, was it? Both times she had left Steve behind. It wasn't that he had opted out or told her that he wouldn't help, but she had decided that he couldn't handle it and took off on her own.

Flirting with Jonathan felt easy and natural, but Steve was heavy between them, at least for Nancy. She felt bad for the way she had treated him, but she also felt like she couldn't waste energy thinking about it right now. Barb and justice and burning that lab to the ground were all she wanted to focus on, as well as her plan to see it all through.

She couldn't deal with this thing with Jonathan right now. She had waited for him, but life tended to just carry on regardless of intention. First Nancy had to get the truth of what happened to Barb and to Will out into the world, then she could focus on her confusing mix of feelings for two different boys.

--

Nancy sat fuming in her temporary bed, mulling over everything that Murray Bauman had said to her and Jonathan.

Retreat? She was here, wasn't she? She had gotten those assholes at Hawkins Lab to admit that they killed Barb and that they were doing everything they could to cover it up, then she had tracked down Murray and forced him to listen to her and to find a way to publish the story, and now... Now the world would know! Or it would know at least a version of the truth. And hopefully the Hollands could

finally find some peace.

This thing with Jonathan was completely different. *We like Steve, but we don't love him.* But she did, didn't she? She liked being around him and didn't want to hurt him. However... the same thing could be said for Jonathan. There were many things that she liked- *loved*- about Steve. But she could also admit that she was curious about Jonathan. Drawn to him, even. Jonathan with his strange humor and his sad eyes and the smile that sliced across his face.

Nancy jumped up and headed across the living area to Jonathan's room, only to bump into him halfway. Her conviction flickered and died at the sight of him and all the tension wrought through his frame.

Jonathan offered the way out with "He's so drunk," and she leapt on it. Because there was thinking about it and then actually doing something.

Trust issues. What if she did or said something and he took it the wrong way? She knew he liked her, but she didn't want to break his heart by starting something only to be unsure of it later. He deserved better. He deserved someone that wasn't torn in two directions. How could she even like two boys at the same time? Surely that wasn't normal, or natural. But, also, who was the judge of such things? She already rebelled against her cookie-cutter life. Was she going to spend her whole life doing what she was told? Trying to be who everyone thought she was?

Absolutely not.

Kissing Jonathan... It felt a lot like kissing Steve, somehow. It felt safe and familiar.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for any confusion: I decided to keep adding chapters to this story instead of creating a new one. I also added some tags to reflect the chapters I'm working on. Now that the boring stuff (for me) is out of the way I'm writing like a madwoman!

4. Steve

Summary for the Chapter:

*I feel we're falling away
You got me hoping for a miracle
Give me one more day
Let me hold you in my arms, yeah*

-In My Arms by Grizfolk (ft. Jamie N Commons)

“Steve!” Nancy gasped as she spotted him, Jonathan drawing up alongside her. Other students in the hallway dodged around them, but not without curious, lingering stares.

“Hey Nance.” Steve grinned around the bruises kissing his face. He glanced up at Byers, expecting to feel jealousy or hatred or really anything, but there was just the ever-present void inside of him where Nancy’s love had once been.

She stepped closer, frowning in concern. “What happened?”

“Byers,” he quipped, then promptly cracked up at the shocked look on the other boy’s face.

Nancy rolled her eyes, a grin touching the edges of her lips. “You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.”

Jonathan smiled and exhaled, but both were shaky at best. Actually, his whole countenance was tense. Did he think Steve was going to come flying at him?

Nancy’s bright eyes met his. “Can we... Can we go somewhere and talk?”

Steve felt his heart do something funny in his chest. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

And it was the weirdest thing, because he had been so looking

forward to this moment; to having Nancy alone so he could confess the depths of his feelings, to get her away from whatever spell Byers had her under, to make himself a priority in her life again. But as she moved away from Jonathan, something about the other boys just seemed to... crumble. Like she was the only thing keeping him together. And that was a feeling Steve knew all too well.

"Byers, come with us," Steve demanded before he could think about it too much.

And he'd thought Jonathan had looked surprised before. "What? Why?"

"Because this involves all three of us." Only as he was saying it did Steve realize it was true. "Also I want to hear about what you guys were up to that night with the monster and all that."

Nancy was studying him intensely, even as she stated, "I think that's a good idea."

Byers looked quietly panicked, but nodded when Nancy glanced back at him.

Steve took a deep, steadying breath. "Cool. Alright. Where's a good place we can go?"

As if on cue, the bell rang for their next class, making Byers flinch a little. "What about the darkroom?" he suggested. "There shouldn't be anyone in there now. And I can always lock the door behind us."

Steve nodded. "Great. Lead the way."

By an unspoken consensus they left the main lights off once they got there, the dark giving them a sense of security and anonymity. Steve looked at Nancy, at the way the red light traced the paths of her jaw and cheekbone, and ached with how much he missed her.

She crossed her arms and drew in a breath to say something, but then didn't. Steve hugged his own arms, looking at the ground and wondering where to begin. He wanted to know if Jonathan and Nancy were together now, or if he still had a fighting chance, if he even wanted to fight if it meant conflicting Nancy and making her

feel bad.

“So what happened?” Steve asked abruptly. He'd meant between the two of them, but the way it made both of them startle and look up at him made him change his mind. “When you two disappeared. While I was babysitting.”

Nancy did most of the talking, telling Steve how she and Jonathan had tricked their way into Hawkins Lab to get recorded evidence, their interview with Murray Bauman, and then coming back to find Will and Joyce gone and monsters on the loose.

Steve glanced at Jonathan as Nancy told him about coming into the Byers house only to find it graffitied with strange drawings and placed to look like a map, his family gone. Jonathan was studying the ground, but the red light played with his eyelashes and the dark circles under his eyes, making him look more haunted than usual. Steve couldn't help but feel bad for him, for having to go through the same old shit a second time. Talk about traumatizing.

“How did you wind up with the kids?” Nancy asked him, tilting her head in curiosity.

Steve told her about Dustin's baby monster that suddenly wasn't a baby anymore, and his concern over the fact that none of his friends were answering his distressed radio calls. Once he'd known what they were up against there was no way he'd let those kids face down one monster, let alone a dozen, alone. And so he'd wound up with them at the lab and then back at Byers' house, where their stories briefly converged.

“Okay.” Nancy's eyes were lingering on his bruises. “What happened after we left with Will?”

Steve ran a hand through his hair, sighing in embarrassment. “Well. Billy came by for Max. He started attacking that Lucas kid so I got into it.” He met her eyes, which were creased in confusion. “He hit me with a beer bottle or something. Made me all fuzzy. Then he whaled on me until Max stabbed him with that syringe Mrs. Byers had for Will. So yes, okay, some twelve year-old saved my ass let's please never talk about it again.”

He glanced at Jonathan, who was pressing his lips together and obviously trying not to smile. It should have made Steve mad, since Byers had beat him up last year, but instead he felt relieved that some of the tension had finally left the other boy.

“Anyway!” Steve clapped his hands together roughly. “Moving on. Those little shits kidnapped me and took me to the hive thing, we set it on fire, ran like hell. And here we are.” God, had that only been a week ago? “I guess your plan of burning the monster out of Will worked?”

Simultaneously Jonathan winced and Nancy glanced over at him, brow furrowed in concern. She looked back at Steve. “Yeah, it worked. It was... really terrible, though.”

Jonathan turned his back to them, hugging his arms tightly.

Nancy glanced at him again, briefly, and then blurted out, “You weren't a shitty boyfriend.”

Steve blinked, caught off-guard. “What?”

“You weren't a shitty boyfriend,” she repeated firmly, even as her eyes teared up. “You were a great boyfriend. I just- All I could ever think about was Barb and what happened last year and the fact that no one knew anything about it... It just- it drove me crazy, Steve.” Nancy's voice cracked at the end and she sniffled, blinking rapidly.

He nodded, accepting what she was saying. Really, he should've noticed it a long time ago; how not-okay she was. “It's alright, Nance. Really, it is.” God he wanted to hug her and make her feel better. Why wasn't Jonathan doing that? “Are- are you and Byers dating now?”

She shook her head at the same time Jonathan turned back around, face composed. “No. I really just need a break for awhile, you know? Figure my own stuff out. We're just friends. But... I'd like to be friends with you, too.”

Steve couldn't help but smile, happy that Nancy wasn't mad at him and that she still wanted to be in his life. “That's awesome. Can we

hug? Just as friends.”

Nancy giggled wetly and rolled her eyes, but she nodded and stepped into his embrace easily. He held her close, one arm around her shoulders while the other cupped the back of her head, trying to give her as much comfort as he possibly could. She sighed against his shoulder, hugging him back tightly. Oh how he loved Nancy Wheeler.

Without meaning to, Steve glanced up at Jonathan. The other boy looked calm and happy as well, hands shoved into his jeans pockets.

And that's when Steve got his idea.

5. Jonathan

Summary for the Chapter:

*When you were young,
You never knew which way you'd go.*

-Desire Lines by Deerhunter

Jonathan wearily approached his car, feeling wrung-out from another long day of school. He was surprised to find that he was pleased at the sight of Steve sitting on his trunk, smoking a cigarette.

“Byers,” Steve greeted, lazily waving as he got closer.

Jonathan sighed quietly to himself, feeling a pang of envy that he could never be like Steve: carelessly draped across a car, his body a long line of muscle, smoking happily, his hair a glorious tangled mess, his sunglasses perfectly framing his face.

Stop! a voice in his mind snapped, sounding suspiciously like his father. *Quit acting like a fag.*

Jonathan felt himself paling and focused his mind on Nancy, thinking about the curl of her eyelashes, her hair, her lips...

“Where's Nance?” Jonathan asked, squinting up at Steve.

The other boy grinned loosely. “Nice to see you, too.”

He hated the blush he felt tickling the sides of his nose. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Steve echoed, not unkindly. “She had to talk to a teacher. Said she'd meet us here in a bit.”

“Jonathan!”

He turned at the sound of his name, quickly locating Will and his friends on their bikes. They waved at each other briefly before Will pedaled away.

This was Jonathan's life now: hanging out with Steve and Nancy when he wasn't working, trying to focus on his classes enough to pass them, making sure he at least saw Will after school if nothing else, and...

Trying not to be a fag.

It was January, meaning it had been almost three months since their second Monster Incident. Nothing had happened between him and Nancy, but nothing had happened between Nancy and Steve either. There was this strange... energy between the three of them, though. It took a long time before Jonathan was able to correctly label it as *flirting*. He was desperately confused by Steve's part in it; he had no idea if he wanted to be Steve Harrington or kiss him. And, even worse, he had no previous experiences or other friends to help him draw any conclusions.

"Your brother looks good," Steve commented as the other boys took off.

Jonathan nodded, feeling a semblance of peace touch on his ever-present anxiety. "He does. Finally."

The other boy hopped off the car, throwing the remnants of his cigarette away. "Let's wait in the car, man. It's freezing!"

Jonathan nodded, pulling off his messenger bag to toss in the back as he climbed in the driver's seat. He started the car and turned on the heat, stuffing his hands between his thighs and hunching into himself for warmth. Jonathan tucked his chin and let his eyes close, feeling his exhaustion wash over him.

He jerked when the the hair by his temple shifted, looking over at Steve, whose hand was hovering between them.

"You okay, man?" he asked, brow furrowed over his sunglasses.

Jonathan blinked at him. "Yeah?"

Steve snorted, withdrawing that confusing hand and pulling off his sunglasses. "Bull. You look like you haven't slept in a week."

Jonathan straightened a little, feeling himself shy away from Steve and hating himself for it. *Trust issues*, teased a voice in his head. “I, uh. Sometimes it's just hard. To sleep,” he mumbled.

“Nightmares?” Steve asked, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Jonathan nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“Me too, man.” He grinned ruefully. “They're always about the kids. Those little shits. Like, sometimes I wasn't able to save them from those monsters. The Demo-Dogs or whatever. Or sometimes we get stuck underground and everything is on fire and we're trapped...”

It was the slight shake in his voice on the last word that encouraged Jonathan. “Um. When we were- when we were burning that thing out of Will-” He cleared his throat as his voice cracked. “He was... screaming.” The last word came out as a whisper as the memories shot in through him. He dug his nails into palms, trying to swallow the tears that had risen to the back of his throat. “I- I thought we were killing him.”

Steve's hand, broad and warm, landed on his shoulder, gripping it tightly. Jonathan glanced over at him, but saw only steadfastness and understanding in his hazel eyes. He swallowed again, suddenly thinking of that time he had sat with Steve outside this very car, after he and Nancy had fought.

“I was so scared,” Jonathan admitted quietly, hating the shake in his voice. He had more to say, but the words became a dam in his throat. He choked a little, breaking away from Steve's gaze.

“Hey, man, I would be, too,” Steve admitted. “I was scared with those kids and I'm not even related to any of them. And that was the second time you almost lost him.”

Jonathan shuddered at his words, tears falling unbidden onto his lap, tickling down his cheeks. It was true, and it was all he ever thought about. How he hadn't protected Will *again*.

“Hey, hey,” Steve was saying, that hand traveling from his shoulder

to grip his foreman, which was taut with tension. "It's okay. Everyone is fine."

What a lie. Everyone was *not* fine. He could hear his mom crying at night over Bob, when she thought her sons had gone to sleep. He could see Will tracing invisible patterns in the sky with his eyes, forever on edge. He knew Nancy still ached for Barb constantly, and had continued to have weekly dinners with the Hollands, often on her own.

And Jonathan... he couldn't sleep. Everytime he drifted off the echoes of Will's screams came back. Sometimes, in his nightmares, they did kill him. And sometimes the monster inside of Will managed to kill his mom before they drove it out. Sometimes Jonathan lost everyone, all at once, and he was left alone. Sometimes his dreams were full of nothing but corpses.

Steve was murmuring something, "Bring it in, man. Come here," and tugging him over.

Gritting his teeth and trying to choke back his tears, Jonathan let Steve draw him into a one-armed hug. He wasn't used to touching anyone outside of his family, so it took him a minute to relax, to fully appreciate the gesture.

"In through your nose, out through your mouth," Steve was saying, the hand that wasn't gripping his arm rubbing wide circles on Jonathan's back.

He shuddered again as he tried to follow Steve's instructions, his breathing shaky and strained. His free hand curled into the material of Steve's jacket by his hip. Jonathan could feel the anxiety clawing up his throat and wrapping around his lungs. He tried to think of better things: Will on good days, Nancy's unabashed grin, developing photos, his mom's laugh, making mixed tapes, the way Steve looked at him sometimes...

Jonathan tensed, reality crashing back into him. Steve Harrington was hugging him in a car outside of their school, and Nancy was due around any moment. The only thing more embarrassing than his current situation would be an audience to it. He drew back hastily,

rubbing the backs of his hands over his face. “S-sorry,” he managed, pulling himself back together as quickly as he’d fallen apart.

“It’s okay, man.” Steve’s hazel eyes were searching, concerned.

Jonathan looked away, staring out his car window and feeling like he would drown in self-loathing. He wanted to leave the car, but he knew he looked like he’d been crying. He couldn’t take the scrutiny, not now.

“In my worst nightmare,” Steve began slowly, “those kids go to the tunnels without me. Usually Billy kills me and then they just go alone, because, you know, they’re stubborn little shits. And then I’m not there to help them. And they get eaten, or trapped, or burned, or lost...” He trailed off. “Or sometimes they survive but they’re mauled. Missing limbs and shit.”

Jonathan looked over at Steve, only to find that his eyes were shining, despite his cavalier words.

Steve smiled weakly. “Hey. How about you call me next time you can’t sleep. I have a phone in my room. I probably won’t be sleeping either. That way... at least you won’t be alone, right?”

Jonathan blinked, touched by the offer, even though he knew he’d never take him up on it. “Okay.”

“Yeah?” Steve’s answering grin was resplendent.

“Yeah.”

--

Jonathan exhaled shakily, rubbing his forehead against the back of the plastic phone. He had stretched the cord down the hallway so he could close himself in his room, but he still hadn’t made the call yet. It was stupid he was even considering it, but... he had woken up hours ago, drenched in sweat, and hadn’t been able to fall asleep since.

He uncurled his fist, staring at the piece of paper crumpled there. It had the number to Steve’s personal line on it, given to him two weeks ago after his embarrassing meltdown in the car. Steve had said he

could call whenever...

Before Jonathan could change his mind, he lifted his thumb from the plunger and dialed the number. If Steve didn't answer after three rings, he would hang up and forget he'd ever attempted this foolishness.

Steve picked up after one ring. "Byers?"

Jonathan suddenly became aware of the sweat on his shirt cooling around his collarbone, sending a shiver rolling down his spine. "How did you know?"

He chuckled. "Who else would be calling me at... What time is it?"

Jonathan glanced at his watch, wincing a little. "Almost five. Sorry."

"Don't be; I wasn't sleeping anyway," Steve answered breezily. "Listen to this: in tonight's cinematic masterpiece via my brain me and the kids never even made it out of that car lot. I told you about that, right? We were trapped in this RV expecting one monster when, like, ten of them showed up. And they started attacking the RV and finding ways inside of it... It was totally scary. Well in real life they all got called away by the Hive Mind or whatever, but in my dream they tore that van apart, piece by piece, and then came for us. So, yeah, no more sleeping for me."

Jonathan found himself smiling despite himself. It was like Steve couldn't help but be charming.

"What about you, man? Or will your shit give me a new kind of nightmare?"

He ran his fingers back through his hair, feeling it stick up in random places. "No. Well, I don't think so. Um... So we had burned that monster out of Will. And, when we did, it was this weird black cloud that kind of hovered around for a minute before it left. But in my dream it attacked us. It killed Will, my mom, me, Nance..." It sounded so small, talking about it outloud. But maybe that was the point: throw it out in the open and let the enormity of everything else wash it away.

“Shit, man,” he sighed, sounding sympathetic. “Have you taken to keeping spare sheets by your bed? Or is it just me that sweats like crazy?”

Jonathan laughed a little. “Definitely not just you. I’m going through so much laundry.”

“Dude, I know! I finally had to ask my mom to teach me how to use our washer and dryer.”

“Wait. You’ve never washed your own clothes before now?”

It was all easier, somehow, over the phone and in the dark comfort of his familiar bedroom. Jonathan didn’t have to worry so much, since nothing was immediately in front of him. That first night, he and Steve talked until dawn. The next day at school they smiled sleepily at each other, but didn’t mention their conversation. Nancy glanced between them knowingly, but held her peace.

Jonathan started calling about once a week, almost always finding Steve already awake. Every now and then he would wake the other boy up, but Steve would always mumble tiredly to him until he fell back asleep. And if Jonathan stayed on the phone for a little while longer listening to him gently snore into the receiver, well... that was his business.

Really, it was only a matter of time before Jonathan interrupted Steve during a... nocturnal emission.

“Byers?”

The way Steve mumbled into the phone made Jonathan aware that he had woken the other boy. But there was something in his voice that also clued him into a different issue. He felt his heart jump into his throat as Steve sighed off the edge of a moan and he knew, he just knew, that Steve was touching himself.

“S-sorry,” Jonathan choked out, feeling his blush spread across his cheeks and down to his chest as he quickly hung up. He was rock-hard just thinking about Steve laying in bed, a hand down his boxers, the way his hair would fall against his pillow, the way his head

would tip back as he moaned...

As he reached into his own pajama pants, Jonathan's cheeks were burning so hard his eyes were starting to water. He couldn't believe he was imagining Steve that way, but he also couldn't help himself; it was too hot.

The phone started beeping at him that it had been off the hook too long. Groaning quietly in frustration, Jonathan thumbed the plunger down as he started to move his hand, pressing his back against his bedroom wall as pleasure curled in his belly.

Suddenly the phone rang, scaring the shit out of him. He quickly moved his thumb off the plunger to answer it, not wanting it to wake up his mom or brother. A moment later, Jonathan realized what he'd done. Inhaling shakily, he brought the receiver up to his ear.

"Jonathan? Are you there?" Steve sounded strung-out and overwhelmed.

Everything inside of Jonathan throbbed with desire, but he kept his silence.

"I can hear you breathing," Steve told him quietly, panting. "Byers, listen. I was dreaming about Nancy but when I woke up... I was thinking of you."

Steve groaned, but Jonathan hung up the phone again before he could hear anything else, or before Steve could hear him reach his own climax.

6. Nancy

Summary for the Chapter:

How long have you known?

How long has it shown?

Forever?

Forever?

-How Long Have You Known by DIIV

Something had happened. She narrowed her eyes, looking between the two of them. Over the past couple of weeks it had seemed like Steve and Jonathan were getting closer: Steve had told her about the late-night phone calls, and some of the strain that haunted Jonathan had seemed to abate. They had finally been fully relaxed around each other.

But now Jonathan's tension was back in full force and Steve couldn't stop fidgeting and casting wounded glances towards Jonathan, who was too distracted by his own thoughts to notice. Nancy idly tapped her pencil, carefully watching the two of them. They were up in her room, ostensibly doing homework. Steve had always been terrible at schoolwork and Jonathan's concentration had been shot since November, so Nancy had been helping them out as best she could.

Jonathan tended to doze off about an hour in, though, and they always let him because they both knew he wasn't sleeping well. Currently he was on the bed with Nancy, laying on his stomach with his elbows propped up on either side of his biology text. His head was slowly getting closer, the tips of his hair, which was badly in need of a trim, brushing against the colorful pages.

Sitting beside him, Nancy watched as he rearranged his arms, folding his left and laying his head on it. He made a show of trying to keep reading, but within moments had dropped off. Even though his face had gone slack, his mouth open just a little, his shoulders were still wound with tension. Did he ever relax?

Steve was sitting on the floor beside the bed. As soon as he met

Nancy's eyes she nodded towards the door and they quietly crept out together. They almost always did this after Jonathan had fallen asleep, wanting to leave him in peace for as long as they were able.

Nancy led Steve downstairs to the living room, thankful that the rest of her family was out of the house. She curled up on the couch while Steve flopped down beside her, close without being too close, and sighed noisily. This was usually the time they spent catching up and talking, but Nancy had an agenda today.

"What happened?" she asked bluntly.

Steve tipped his head against the back of the couch, staring up at the ceiling. He didn't say anything, but she could tell he was trying to mull through something in his mind.

Nancy reached over, touching his hand that was between them gently. Even though she was adamant about not dating either boy, she'd had a couple of slips over the past few months. Holding hands here, kissing there, being too flirtatious... She really didn't mean to, but she cared about them both and, honestly, missed the causal physicality that came with dating someone. But she didn't know how to date only one of them, so she kept her friendship with both.

"Steve," she gently prodded, lacing their fingers together.

"Okay." He switched around so he was sitting cross-legged in front of her and holding both her hands in his. He looked so nervous. "I- I don't even know where to start..."

"Start wherever," she recommended, rubbing the pad of her thumb across his knuckles.

"Okay," he repeated, nodding to himself. "Nance... you know I still like you, right?"

She nodded carefully, maintaining eye contact.

"Okay. But- so- well- I also... kind of... like Jonathan?"

Nancy sat back a little, blinking in surprise. "Wait... I'm confused. You're gay?" No, as soon as she said it she knew that wasn't right,

and sure enough he was already shaking his head.

“No, I mean. I like both of you? I don't know what that makes me, and I know it's weird but- but it's true, Nance, I swear.”

His eyes were so wide and desperate there wasn't a doubt in Nancy's mind that he was being honest. “Okay,” she replied slowly, trying to wrap her mind around everything. It wasn't that far-fetched, she supposed. “So... now what?”

Steve inhaled, for longer than she thought would have been possible, and then exhaled slowly. “So... I know you like me and Jonathan, and now you know I like both of you... What if Jonathan liked both of us?”

Something fluttered inside of Nancy's chest, something lovely and dangerous. “What if he did?” she found herself whispering. She had already come to a logical conclusion, but she wanted to hear him say it.

Steve opened his mouth, red touching his cheeks, but nothing came out. He closed it again, defeat settling over his features.

Nancy leaned in closer. “What if the three of us dated?” she suggested quietly, a smile tugging on her lips unbidden.

Steve's eyes brightened, a grin stretching across his own face. “Yeah. Yeah? Right? Like, just what we're doing now, but with more fun stuff.”

A small laugh escaped her. She did miss the 'fun stuff.' “Steve...” Her grip on his hands tightened. God this was so exciting, but also so stupid. What were they thinking? Why hadn't they done it before? What would people think? Who cared? How would it work between them? Wouldn't it be fun to find out? “We have to talk to Jonathan. Wait, did you tell him already? Is that why he looks so wrecked today?”

Steve grimaced a little. “I mean... Kind of? He may have called me last night while I was in the middle of a certain kind of dream.”

Nancy couldn't help but think of it, and found her stomach dipping in

excitement. "And you answered?" she asked, slightly scandalized.

He studied her, a knowing smile touching his lips. "Yeah. It was a dream about you, Nance. But when I heard Byers' voice I got distracted. I told him I was thinking of him. I think he liked it."

Nancy broke their eye contact, feeling flustered. Why was the idea of them together so... *hot*?

"Wanna wake him up?" Steve suggested.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "No! Let the poor guy sleep!"

"Okay, okay. Can we just quietly wait for him to wake up?"

Nancy smiled despite herself. "Sure."

--

Jonathan woke up about an hour later, blinking in exhausted confusion. Nancy was sitting cross-legged by his head, gently running her fingers through his hair, combing a patch of it behind his right ear and out of his face.

He looked up at her, smiling softly. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she quietly admonished.

"You fall asleep every time, Byers," Steve joked from his position sitting down by Jonathan's feet.

Jonathan jerked his head up and looked back at him, then pushed himself up so he was sitting as well, helping them form a triangle. He couldn't seem to meet Steve's eyes.

"Jonathan." Nancy reached over and grabbed his hand, holding it tightly. He cast a quick glance at Steve before meeting her eyes, somehow looking both happy and panicked. This would be the hard part. "You know I like you, right?"

He blinked and nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"Okay. But, you know, I also like Steve."

Resignation touched the edges of his features. "I know."

"Well, it turns out that Steve also likes me... as well as you."

Jonathan twitched a little, shooting a wide-eyed glance over at Steve, who just smiled hopefully.

"And," Nancy pushed on, "I think... I think you like the two of us also."

Jonathan's hand tore free from her grip as he stumbled off the side of the bed, unfortunately finding a wall at his back. "N-no- I couldn't- I would never-"

"Byers, it's alright!" Steve interrupted, scooting to the edge of the bed and looking like he wanted to reach for him.

Nancy jumped off her side of the bed and rounded the end. She didn't want him to feel trapped, but she also didn't want him to take off. Even though he'd fought a monster, people were often scarier.

Jonathan pushed both of his hands back through his hair, revealing his pale face. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, visibly collecting himself. After a moment he looked at them again, hugging his arms tightly. "You two are my friends," he stated firmly. Nancy's heart broke at the terror in his eyes.

"That won't change," Steve replied adamantly, hands now resting harmlessly on the bed. "I told Nance, even: I want exactly what we have but with... more."

Jonathan stared at Steve. "I'm not a f-fag."

"Neither am I, man," Steve shot back immediately. "I mean, I don't know what I am, but I do know I like Nancy and that last night on the phone with you was fucking hot."

Jonathan somehow managed to blush even as he got paler, glancing over at Nancy. She smiled encouragingly. "It's okay, Jonathan. He told me already."

He shook his head a little and abruptly sat down, hugging his knees

to his chest. "I just- I need a minute."

Steve and Nancy looked at each other, silently deciding that Nancy should be the one to try and talk to him. She stepped forward and knelt in front of him, trying to meet his eyes even as they evaded hers. "Jonathan," she coaxed softly, touching her fingertips to his shin. "Talk to us. Don't keep it all inside."

A muscle in his jaw twitched, his hands fidgeting with each other restlessly. Nancy kept the silence and tried to project calmness towards him, keeping her own breathing steady.

"You-" he started abruptly, like the word burst out of his mouth without it being his intention. "You guys are my friends, okay?" He finally met her eyes. "You're my only friends. Which is lame, I know, but I'm sure you guys have figured it out by now."

Nancy smiled a little, encouraging him.

"I don't want things to be ruined," he told her softly, earnestly, with a quick glance up at Steve. "I don't think I really know how I feel. It's so *confusing*."

"It's confusing for us, too, man," Steve assured him, kneeling down beside Nancy carefully. "And I don't want things with us to get ruined either, but I think they could be... better, you know?"

"I've liked both of you for a long time," Nancy confessed, looking back and forth between the two boys. "I don't know when it happened, but it's been there for awhile. I didn't want to date one of you because I cared for both, and I couldn't hurt either of you. I thought there was something wrong with me, that I could like two people so much at the same time. But maybe this is how it's supposed to be?"

Jonathan still looked uncertain, as well as vaguely ill. But he also looked... desperate.

"What do you want, Byers?" Steve asked after a long moment, the picture of sincerity. "We'll take it at your pace, okay? I swear."

Jonathan's looked between the two of them, face thoughtful. After a

minute he asked, "Can you... Can you guys sit on the bed?"

Nancy smiled and followed Steve up, crawling towards the middle of the mattress. She sat with her legs tucked to one side while Steve was cross-legged again. Jonathan stood up as well and spent a minute just staring at the two of them with his dark, serious eyes.

Eventually he joined them on the bed, sitting beside Nancy. She smiled at him, warmth radiating in her chest, knowing the kind of risk he was taking. He brought a hand up and tucked a stray curl behind her ear, fingertips brushing the edge of her jaw as he did so.

She brought a hand up and covered his, grinning. "Your hands are always so cold," she told him quietly.

Jonathan smiled back. "Sorry," he replied softly, then leaned forward and kissed her sweetly.

Nancy returned the gesture eagerly, but let him set the pace. She didn't want to scare him off, but she'd always liked kissing him.

After a few long minutes he drew away, absently licking his lips in a way that made something electric zip down her spine.

"Can..." Jonathan hesitated, then visibly steeled himself. "Can you two kiss?"

Nancy couldn't help her growing excitement, feeling like this was all going in a positive direction. She looked over as Steve drew closer, also smiling. He threw a wink at Jonathan, gently cupped the back of her head, and drew her into a searing kiss. Nancy gasped a little against his mouth and let his tongue in, that little bolt of electricity growing.

They parted pretty quickly, panting lightly. Steve glanced over at Jonathan, who looked both excited and guilty.

"Steve?" he asked quietly.

And Nancy had always known Jonathan to be reclusive, antisocial, and socially awkward, but never shy like he was just then.

Jonathan tilted his chin up, and she could see his pulse fluttering in his neck. "Can I kiss you?"

Steve grinned at him. "Yeah, man."

Blushing slightly, but looking determined, Jonathan edged closer until the two boys sat in front of each other, knees pressed together. They both leaned forward and Jonathan's hand came up, brushing against Steve's cheek. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly, seriously, nervous tension wrought through his body.

Steve laughed a little, bringing his own hand up to Jonathan's cheek and pulling him forward. Their lips slotted together and Nancy couldn't believe she hadn't noticed the chemistry between them earlier. It was *incredible*. Jonathan was blushing fetchingly as Steve smiled against his mouth, kissing him slowly but with clear intent. Nancy found that she loved the sight.

They broke apart after awhile, panting lightly. A new kind of tension had found its way to Jonathan's shoulders; the same kind that Nancy felt at the small of her back. "Yeah?" she couldn't help but ask, excited.

Steve chuckled, nodding his head enthusiastically. "Oh yeah."

They looked at Jonathan, who bit his bottom lip around a grin. "Yeah."

Author's Note:

Welcome (back) kids. Let's see where these losers take us this year!

Title and summary from the song Cold Love by Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

Thanks for reading, :)